

MASTERING KNOWLEDGE IN MODERN TIMES

Fethullah Gülen as an Islamic Scholar

Edited by
İsmail Albayrak



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CHAPTER FOUR

Fethullah Gülen and His Theology of Social Responsibility³²²

Zeki Sarıtoprak

The aim of this chapter is to find an answer for the question of whether or not it is possible to talk about a contemporary Islamic theology of social responsibility. If so, who would be among the representatives of this contemporary theology? I argue that one contemporary Muslim scholar, Fethullah Gülen, could be considered among the most influential Muslim social theologians of our time. This chapter provides a brief background to the theological discourse in Islam as well as an Islamic theology of social responsibility and its possibility in our time.

The concept of a theology of social responsibility is not foreign to the nature of Islamic understanding of humankind's relationship with God, which is essential to the subject matter of theology. As Christian theologian H. Richard Niebuhr said, "The subject matter of theology is always man-

³²² In the Islamic theology, when an individual does a good action, or is encouraged to do a good action, he or she does not do it just because they are socially expected to do it, but for the sake of God. For example: to plant a tree in a place where there is no human being may not be considered to be a social responsibility, but from an Islamic theological perspective, it is a human duty because it is done for the sake of God. Though human beings will not benefit from the fruits of this tree, but the fact that birds, animals, insects, and even tiny creatures such as worms will benefit makes this action worth an award in the sight of God. For this reason, the phrase, "social responsibility" in my current paper will be used in the sense of accountability before God, the creation, and human beings. In this use, there is no secular connotation in this phrase which may indicate its disconnection with piety. In this paper, social responsibility includes the concept of *ridā*, or pleasing God, or doing for the sake of God only, with no expectation of personal advantages.

before-God ... (and) is implicit in all theological anthropology."³²³ Similarly renowned Muslim sociologist, theologian, and historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) divided responsibilities into two categories:

Human responsibilities before God are two: those related to human actions and those related to heart. What is related to heart is faith, or Islamic creeds, which indicate what an individual should believe in and should not believe in; such as the essence of God, His attributes, things related to the afterlife, for instance resurrection, rewards, punishments, and destiny. The science that brings rational proofs for these beliefs is called the science of *kalam*.³²⁴

Early Muslim theologians and jurists, such as the great founders of three major schools of Islamic law, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali, have included "actions with limbs" in their definition of faith or *iman*. For them, "faith is belief with the heart, confession with the tongue, and action with limbs."³²⁵ These three components of faith are shared by almost all Muslim theologians.³²⁶ Although a lack of action may not be considered the same as a lack of faith, action is a great sign of the strength or weakness of one's faith. Therefore, it can be argued that the third component of this definition of faith, "action by the limbs," presents a foundation for an Islamic theology of social responsibility. Here it should be stated that the approach that I am proposing is different from that of the *Mu'tazilites* who make action a sign of faith and inaction a lack of faith when they say, "The one who commits grave sins is no longer a Muslim." In the same way, they say that the one who does not fulfill religious obligations is no longer considered a believer. I argue the more mainstream Sunni approach that inaction can be a sign of weak faith, not a complete lack of faith. Many Qur'anic verses and sayings from the Prophet support this theology.

Historically, Muslim theologians developed intellectual and theoretical aspects of Islamic theology and left the action part of it to the science of *fiqh*, which deals with the believer's daily activities including daily prayers, social interactions, charities, marriages, trades, etc. Because the tradition of "actions by the limbs" did not find a chance to develop thoroughly within

³²³ Niebuhr 1970, p. 141.

³²⁴ Ibn Khaldun 1995. Retrieved from www.al-warraq.com on 11/05/2009, I.250. 436.

³²⁵ Amir 1997, p. 56.

³²⁶ Some Hanafis who exclude actions with limbs and include only belief with the heart and confession with the tongue, are an exception.

the scope of Islamic theology, historically what can be called a theology of social responsibility remained somewhat under the framework of Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh*.³²⁷ Until the twentieth century, Muslim theologians have not had a specific discussion of a theology of social responsibility, *per se*, although the concept was implied. Social theology had been developed by Ottoman intellectuals, Ziya Gökalp and Mehmed Şerafeddin, who were influenced by Western social sciences, namely sociologists Auguste Comte (d. 1857) and Emile Durkheim (d. 1917) and their theories of religion, and did not borrow from contemporary Christian social theology. Their approach, however, was centered on the idea of sociology, whereas an Islamic theology of social responsibility is centered on Qur'anic teaching. While the concept of a theology of social responsibility is more relevant to the teaching of Islam and centered in the Qur'an, as a specific field within Islamic theology, it did not develop thoroughly early on. This phenomenon can be traced to the powerful and encompassing nature of the science of *fiqh* among Muslim scholars which covered an Islamic theology of social responsibility for a long period of time. New studies may find some further reasons for this.

After this preliminary introduction to the subject, it is appropriate to comment on certain terminology and to provide a background on Islamic theology. Etymologically, the meaning of "theology," which is "reflection on God" or "talk about God," comes from the Greek words *theo* and *logia*, which mean "God" and "reflection." Any discourse that makes God the centre of discussion is considered theology. In this regard, the Islamic science of *kalam* can be translated as "Islamic theology" in modern English usage. The term *kalam* itself, like *theo* and *logia*, can also be translated as "talk" or "talk about God." "*Kalam* is a discipline in which God's essence, His attributes, and the conditions of contingents are discussed. This discussion is based on the principles of Islam with regard to a creature's beginning and end."³²⁸ The phrase "principles of Islam" means to exclude the science of philosophy from *kalam*.

³²⁷ Nevertheless, the science of *kalam* had developed a theology of Prophethood (*nubuwwah*) and leadership (*imamah*), which are also directly related to the social aspects of human life and are also related to the concept of a theology of social responsibility.

³²⁸ See al-Tahanawi 1984.

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Classical *kalam* has systematically discussed and centered on three main themes: *uluhiyyah* (divinity), *nubuwwah* (Prophethood), and *ma'ad* (the afterlife). These three are also the major themes of the Qur'an. After encountering various religious traditions, early scholars of *kalam* developed Islamic theological arguments on these and similar themes to respond to the challenges coming from pre-Islamic traditions, namely Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. Despite the development of ideas in this early period, the Qur'an, with its dynamic nature, has remained a vivid source throughout Islamic history. It can be argued that each era has found a reference in the Qur'an for the needs of its specific circumstances.

Having a systematic discourse on God, Prophethood, and the afterlife, classical *kalam* has been merely theoretical and intellectual. Despite the above definition of faith, which is the main subject of *kalam*, in classical *kalam* the social aspect is almost absent. As mentioned above, the social and individual praxis of Islamic theology has become the subject of another Islamic science, known as *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence. Those who were studying this particular Islamic science would be known as *fuqaha* (jurists), while those who were studying *kalam* were known as *mutakallimun* (theologians). Interestingly, unlike the majority of early scholars of Islamic theology, Abu Hanifa, founder of the Hanafi school of Islamic law, named his brief manifesto of faith *fiqh al-akbar* (great jurisprudence or understanding), which connotes the science that has to do with practical aspects of theology, a meaning that may have been the author's intention. Most probably such a name comes from a Qur'anic verse which suggests that there should be a group of Muslims to do *fiqh* and be dedicated to it (9:122). In this verse, the Qur'an promotes learning and understanding of religion. Also, the Prophet mentioned the word *fiqh* when he said "if God wants to do good to someone He makes him a possessor of *fiqh* (deep understanding) in religion."³²⁹ Action-oriented Islamic science, *fiqh*, has more references in the Scripture of Islam, while theoretical *kalam* is not at all referred to by name. *Kalam* is definitely a term developed later in the tradition.

Traditionally, the science of *kalam* would speak of God, while the science of *fiqh* would show how to worship such a God. These two sciences remain separate throughout Islamic history and some scholars of *fiqh* have

³²⁹ Bukhari, *al-Jami' al-Sahih*, (hadith no. 65).

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certain concerns about the validity of *kalam*-related discourse on Islamic themes. According to this claim, the existence of God and the afterlife does not need to be proven since any attempt to prove it shows doubt and any doubt will weaken the essence of faith. Also, since early *kalam* came from a heretical group, namely the Mu'tazilites, religious figures such as the prominent jurist and the founder of the Hanbali school of Islamic law, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), prohibited the study of the science of *kalam*, thinking that debating religious themes in such a philosophical manner was not compatible with the pristine teachings of the Prophet. Similarly, we have references that Abu Hanifa (d. 765), who arguably wrote the first book of *kalam*, prohibited his son from studying *kalam* because the Mu'tazilite theologians arrogantly discussed *kalam*-related themes.

In the first half of the tenth century, the intellectual world of Islam had an unprecedented development in the "Sunnitization" of the Islamic science of *kalam*. In this era Muslim intellectuals witnessed the emergence of two major figures, namely Abu Hassan al-Ash'ari (d. 936), who was originally a Mu'tazilite and later adopted the Sunni position after a vision of the Prophet who commanded him to support the true religion, and his contemporary, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 944). The acceptance of *kalam* in the Sunni tradition made a considerable contribution to the sophistication of its arguments and to its survival until the present. Therefore, the Islamic science of *kalam* remains a powerful entity among all Islamic sciences. Despite this, in some countries the study of *kalam* is unwelcome due to its philosophical argumentation, which is considered to be against the teaching of the Qur'an by puritanical literalist approaches.

After this preliminary background, it is now appropriate to elaborate on the topic of an Islamic theology of social responsibility and its application in our time. Western scholars have used the term social gospel extensively, and later scholars, such as Dermot A. Lane in his book *Foundations for a Social Theology*, used this term to indicate the importance of praxis in theology. Therefore the challenging question is whether we can speak about a new concept of a theology of social responsibility in *kalam*. Although there were many attempts to renew the use of *kalam* in the twentieth century, scholars such as Abdullatif Harputi, Musa Kazım, İzmirli İsmail Hakkı and more, have developed arguments on how contemporary *kalam* can respond to the challenges of our time but with no connection to the social aspects of *kalam*.

Therefore praxis was neither emphasized in classical *kalam* nor among contemporary renewers of *kalam*. In fact, prominent Muslim historian and scholar of Islamic law, Ahmad Cevdet Pasha, criticized those who were not interested in the practice of Islamic principles.³³⁰

It should be noted that my approach here is different from the approach of scholars mentioned above, who made the social sciences the source of religion, such as when Mehmed Şerafeddin said, "social gathering creates sacredness." This chapter prefers to focus on praxis, which constitutes one of the elements of the definition of faith. Accordingly, unlike what Mehmed Şerafeddin suggested, this chapter proposes that social gathering around the Ka'bah does not make the Ka'bah sacred; rather divine revelation is what makes the Ka'bah important for believers and makes them gather around it. Actions and sacredness are inter-related, but the Qur'anic approach guides action that is based on the requirements of divine revelation and constitutes the third component of the definition of faith. As Cevdet Pasha rightly put it, "we should urge a more practical theology based on life and contemporary needs."³³¹

Here the question comes to mind of who could be a representative of a theology of social responsibility. As we stated above, we will examine Gülen's contribution to the notion of Islamic theology of social responsibility. Although *kalam* presented a deep understanding of the intellectual quality of a human being, it neglected to deal with the ultimate transformation of humankind from a simple, biological creature to a creature whose spiritual level is even higher than that of angels. In fact, Gülen provides a framework for such a transformation through his socio-theological contribution. Traditionally Islamic *kalam*'s main task has been to defend the Islamic creed against intellectual attacks. For Gülen, this defense itself is not sufficient for such a transformation; however, it is still an important task.

Therefore at this juncture, it is appropriate to focus on two points. The first point is that the classical systematic science of *kalam* has served Islam thoroughly for a long period of time. Under new conditions, Muslim theologians need to renew *kalam* and filter out the Greek elements of classical *kalam* that are no longer valid in our time. The second point is that since praxis has not been the subject of classical *kalam*, it seems to be essential to include this

³³⁰ For the details of this, see Özvarlı 2007, pp. 317–30.

³³¹ Ibid, pp. 317–30.

dimension in a renewed study of *kalam*. It can be argued that such an inclusion will make *kalam* more encompassing and more compatible with the overall teaching of the Qur'an. In this regard, *kalam* will not only respond to the challenges that come from a Western critical approach to religion, but will also provide a solid ground for some social activists. Fethullah Gülen, with his social endeavors, represents this aspect of the science of *kalam*.

It can be argued that scholars in the late Ottoman period, such as Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and Muhammed Hamdi Yazır, have left a legacy for Gülen and his endeavors through their writings. Nursi's teaching constitutes a paradigm for Gülen and his theology of social responsibility. The principles mentioned in Nursi's monumental work *Risale-i Nur* constituted a theoretical foundation for Gülen's understanding of what I call a theology of social responsibility. There is no doubt that Gülen is among those who are inspired by these scholars and their works. He successfully managed to build upon their intellectual inquiries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Nursi spoke of the three enemies of Muslims as ignorance, poverty, and disunity, and provided certain intellectual arguments on how to defeat these enemies. Gülen, who came decades after Nursi, put those theories into practice by encouraging wealthy people to break down ignorance by establishing schools and educational institutions and environments, such as student dormitories. Gülen even expanded this plan by providing educational opportunities not only for Muslims but for non-Muslims as well. Therefore, it can be argued that Gülen's strength comes from his utmost conviction that without practice and the engagement of social life, intellectual curiosity and intellectual endeavors on their own will not be successful. Gülen promotes the premises of Islamic theology through his practical institutions. This may contribute to the reconceptualization of Islamic theology to meet the challenges of our time. It should not be an exaggeration to assert that Gülen is one of the rare personalities throughout the history of Islam who has brought a large concept of institutionalization to Islamic activities and philanthropy. He believes that for Muslims to be successful in this moment in history, they must be socially active through institutions. Gülen reminds believers of their social responsibilities not only to their individual faith but also to the need for working for justice and peace in this world.

During his social interaction with the community, Gülen has observed the problems that members of the community face, and he continually

attempts to find remedies for those problems. This is why scholars of social theology in the West consider the recognition and experience of social situations and problems through participative observation as the first stage of social theology. Gülen experienced this firsthand. Gülen provided an alternative for families to educate their children, from the then-disliked state schools in Turkey by encouraging the establishment of educational institutions capable of providing safe environments for learning. Therefore, his theology of social responsibility contains a collective approach to the spiritual and social problems of our time, through the lenses of many social sciences. Of course, Gülen's theology of social responsibility goes hand-in-hand with other contemporary social sciences, such as sociology, economics, and cultural anthropology, as well as ethics. Since Gülen's efforts have evolved into a social contract that houses millions of recipients, their philanthropic contributions fulfill an important stage in Gülen's theology of social responsibility.

For Gülen, the message of the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, is essentially universal. In his analysis of social matters, the Qur'an is his "guidance" and "light." As a result of such guidance, he emphasizes the importance of piety together with social participation. The second verse of the second chapter in the Qur'an reads, "There is no doubt that this Qur'an is a guide for the pious" (2:2). Historically, all Muslim theologians have taken the Qur'an as their main reference, but considering the Qur'an as a reference for a theology of social responsibility, as Gülen does, comes from divine imperatives that guide actions which were not the main subject of debates among early scholars of *kalam*. Muslim mystics, admittedly on a limited scale, have been discussing this aspect of religion, at least what relates to the inner life of believers. Therefore, divine imperatives that guide actions, as strongly presented in the Qur'an, constitute the main pillars of Gülen's theology of social responsibility.

One of the most important aspects of Gülen's approach is his focus on the exemplary personality of the Prophet of Islam. That is to say, Gülen's theology of social responsibility finds its roots in the practices of the Prophet. Therefore, in Gülen's theology, practice as a relationship between God, human beings and the world, is essential. Unlike early classical scholars, Gülen's theology of social responsibility is deeply involved with themes that include both intellectuals and lay people and was expressed through his early sermons and preaching. His sermons, attended by thousands of people from

every section of society, aimed to emphasize the principles of faith. He constantly elaborates that the obstacles that sever a connection between human beings and God should be overcome since the divine door to the mercy of God is open to everyone, as the famous sacred prophetic tradition (*hadith qudsi*) says, "My mercy exceeds my wrath."³³² Elaborating on the scope of social responsibility Gülen describes "the believer" as someone who has knowledge of self, as the *hadith* quote states, "the one who knows oneself will know God." Gülen uses the potentiality of human beings to remind them of their spiritual and social responsibility before God and their fellow humans. In other words, their responsibility before God requires their responsibility before their fellow human beings. Gülen states:

A believer is someone who trusts a candidate of trust with a worthy future, who promises safety to his surroundings, and who has integrated colorful differences in harmony. Such a believer is a decent human being. With such a kind disposition, one is gentle and sensitive, both before people and before God to the extent that if the believer is threatened with death or faces various pressures and false accusations will never attempt to act crudely ... The believer is an exemplary person, who opens one's heart to everyone.³³³

Gülen's endeavors are not aimed at combating his opponents or his oppressors; rather he wants to bring his message to everybody and every member of his community. He also strives to respond to the cries of others as a part of his theology of social responsibility before God:

One loves everyone and everything for God's sake, breathes love, and always creates an aura of love around oneself. The believer hastens to stop cries and responds to grievances, treats pains with antidotes, and transforms the cries of people to laughter ... the believer transforms the storms of fire into breezes of divine pleasure. One mourns to prevent people's mourning and sheds tears as much as the river of Oxus to prevent the tears of others. The believer evaluates oneself based on contributions to the well being of others. The focus of the believer is always on "we" rather than "I." Therefore, the believer is not selfish, but someone who thinks of others.³³⁴

In his description, the individual becomes an agent of "positive action" and nothing can prevent one from acting and contributing positively to the community. As indicated above, a theology of social responsibility in gener-

³³² Bukhari *al-Jam'i al-Sahih*, (Hadith no. 6998).

³³³ Gülen, 2006d, pp. 2-5.

³³⁴ Ibid.

al has a direct relationship with everyday life. Again, in the context of a theology of social responsibility, one can see the synthesis between everyday life and piety. Whether one is aware of it or not, piety has a great impact on everyday life. Gülen says:

When such believers are unable to solve problems with reason and comprehension, they refer to the bright climate of the Qur'an for the solution. They never feel hopeless or emptiness; they do not encounter constant darkness because they enjoy the beauty of life which is as sweet as the water of Zamzam. They live in thankfulness to their Lord and grow the seeds of their lives and multiply it by 7, 70, or even 700.³³⁵

Gülen, because of his personal piety and prayer, gives an inspired approach to the real life of people in their daily routines and practices his theology of social responsibility. The idea of the presence of God encompasses every aspect of Gülen's life. Every action should be for God's sake. Human beings should love creatures because God is the creator. In Islam, the entire face of the earth is considered to be a mosque; thus, prayer can be performed in any place, and piety is not limited to the walls of the mosque. Gülen's understanding of piety transcends mosques. It has to be clarified that Gülen is not against the establishment of mosques but his focus is on a different element of life, and that is education. Such circumstances of piety embedded in the practice of social life prepare a healthy environment for the flow of Qur'anic inspiration.

Therefore, in Gülen's theology, active participation in social life through institutions and individual piety guides individuals to perfection and maturity, not only in their individual lives but in their social lives. What makes Gülen different from early scholars who included Islamic spirituality in the science of *kalam*, such as Ghazzali and Said Nursi, is his emphasis of inclusion on social action within piety. Gülen is making an addition to the foundations of the previous scholars by emphasizing the importance of social life in his theology. For "faith" has more meanings than previous scholars have stated; "*iman*" (faith), is derived from the root *a-m-n*, which means to believe, to promise, to trust, to provide safety for others and to be trusted. Also it means to believe in God, to confess faith, to have a deep

³³⁵ Gülen 2000c, pp. 258–59.

level of faith in heart and conscience ... These are the linguistic meanings carried by this word, faith.³³⁶

Scholars of social theology in the West have a diagram with four stages: action, Scripture, reflection, and analysis of existing social realities. Considering these four stages, Gülen's theology of social responsibility is essentially action-oriented. His main source of inspiration is the Qur'an. His emphasis on piety is embedded in his tradition of prayer and reflection, and forgiveness. In *The Servant of the Most Compassionate*, Gülen refers to Qur'anic verses and Prophetic tradition, "Those who spend in ease and in adversity, those who control their anger, and those who are forgiving toward mankind, God loves those who do good deeds" (3:134). Another verse states, "The servants of God do not commit vulgarity when they pass by profane things, they pass with dignity" (25:72). A saying of the Prophet suggests, "when a woman who already committed adultery came to the Prophet and asked for punishment, the Prophet said: Go back home and repent and God will accept your repentance."³³⁷

Gülen has also developed analytical approaches to the social realities of our time and to how problems can be cured through positive actions. Therefore he is not denying social realities, but is constantly working to make a change in a positive direction. Gülen's recent attempts at interreligious cooperation are an example of such positive action. Therefore, as a Muslim scholar and a social theologian, Gülen contributes to the building of bridges and joint efforts between the adherents of various religious traditions, particularly Christians and Muslims.³³⁸ Such cooperation that has been practiced in different parts of the Islamic world is destined to enrich the social life of believers and contributes to a better understanding among members of various faiths.

As Gülen's efforts towards dialogue are unique in the modern day, he also, unlike classical theologians, focuses on educational institutions rather than the establishment of mosques. For Gülen, long-standing institutions are the source of successful social change. He believes that people, particularly young generations, are in need of schools and educational opportunities. Also, mosques only serve Muslims, while schools serve all human beings, which is an important aspect of Gülen's theology of social responsibility to serve

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Muslim, *al-Sahih*, (Hadith no. 3209).

³³⁸ See Griffith and Santoprak 2005, pp. 329-40.

humanity. In this direction he has inspired hundreds of schools to be built in more than 120 countries around the world. In these schools one can find students from every nationality. On education he says, "... everything that is necessary for life should be taught in schools, this includes classes by experienced doctors on health and on family-related issues, including the relationships between husbands and wives and the raising of children."³³⁹ He believes that education is the most efficient way to defeat terrorism.³⁴⁰

Gülen-inspired activities are not limited to schools; one can find examples from every area of society including hospitals; philanthropic activities such as financial aid to victims of earthquakes in Indonesia and Pakistan, of floods in Bangladesh and New Orleans and of war in Iraq and the Balkans.

Finally, why is understanding Gülen's theology so important in our age? Gülen has successfully managed to combine the values of Islam with contemporary life through educational, social and public health institutions, a combination which has few precedents in the history of Islam. Gülen has also managed to influence thousands of volunteers to go to different corners of the world and participate in the development of the education of human beings. Therefore such vast endeavors should find their place within the framework of Islamic theology, what I call a theology of social responsibility. Gülen does not do this through force or offering great material benefits. On the contrary, he does this only through spiritual inspiration and in conveying a belief in thinking of others rather than of oneself, the essence of his theology of social responsibility. It may be too early to judge Gülen based on these activities within the framework of Islamic theology, but one can see, considering the scope of these large social endeavors, that historians of collective social action and theologians will judge Gülen more accurately in the future. One can observe that Gülen has successfully created a group identity that is concerned with the value of cooperation, which has been contributing to his social theological ideals. It seems to me that Gülen is an important phenomenon in our time. Not only is his theology of social responsibility worthy of further research, but his charismatic leadership and spiritual strength has been catching the attention of people around the world. My hope is that this humble contribution will lead to research on a larger scale on Gülen and his theology of social responsibility.

³³⁹ Akman 2004.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.